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C O N F I D E N T I A L MADRID 001353

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [MO](#) [SP](#)

SUBJECT: MFA OFFICIAL SEES LITTLE PROGRESS ON WESTERN SAHARA

REF: A) MADRID 1324 B) ALGIERS 599

Classified By: Poloff Ricardo Zuniga; reason 1.4 (b).

[11.](#) (C) MFA DAS for Maghreb Affairs Carlos Fernandez Arias told poloff on March 31 that Spain sees few signs of progress in negotiations to resolve the Western Sahara dispute and only limited indications of improved Moroccan-Algerian relations. Arias (protect) said FM Moratinos and other GOS political figures were more optimistic than he was about the chances for advancing on the Western Sahara issue, a point borne out by FM Moratinos' emphatic support for moving ahead expressed during his meeting with the Deputy Secretary on April 2 (Ref A). Arias' analysis was that all of the parties are entrenched in their positions and feel little pressure to compromise. On a more positive note, Arias said that none of the actors, including Polisario, contemplated a resumption of military operations as a viable means for breaking the impasse.

[12.](#) (C) On Moroccan-Algerian relations and the recent meeting between Bouteflika and King Hassan (Ref B), Arias said the high level meeting made him "cautiously optimistic" that both sides were at least interested in toning down their disagreement. He viewed the lack of substantive press reporting on the meeting as a positive indicator, since official silence implied the two leaders engaged in a serious discussion of the issues rather than political posturing.

[13.](#) (C) Arias said Morocco was unsettled by Algerian and Polisario diplomatic successes over the last year and seemed to using this period of relative inactivity on Western Sahara to mount its own diplomatic offensive, for example in Latin America. He said Morocco understood that it had been repeatedly outflanked by the other parties to the dispute, for example by South Africa's decision to support Sahrawi self-determination, and was undertaking a serious effort to broaden its support.

[14.](#) (C) Arias suggested the international community's next steps should remain focused on building confidence, humanitarian projects, and building up the stature of the Arab Maghreb Union, setting aside thornier issues for a more propitious moment. Arias said that if events began to take a more positive turn, it would be essential for a U.S. figure of James Baker's stature to replace de Soto as the Special Representative of the so that the parties would feel pressure to negotiate. He said he'd heard mention of a possible Latin American candidate to replace de Soto, but insisted that only a USG figure would have the political weight to push the parties forward when necessary.

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COMMENT
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[15.](#) (C) Spain has significant strategic interests in seeing a settlement on Western Sahara in order to remove the main irritant in Moroccan-Algerian relations and thereby solidify Spain's unstable southern flank, but domestic political pressure is another important factor in Moratinos' desire to move ahead quickly. Zapatero's overtures to Morocco have accomplished much in terms of improved security cooperation and diplomatic relations with Rabat, but the GOS has little to show for it on Western Sahara. This leaves Zapatero open to opposition criticism that his tilt towards Morocco has come at the expense of the Sahrawis, whose cause enjoys broad popular support in Spain. We have tried to convey our skepticism that a major U.S. figure would be willing to step in where Baker had been unsuccessful, but expect Moratinos and others to continue hoping for direct, high-le